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ABSTRACT

Questionnaires submitted to 454 Pennsylvania teachers indicated that only a small percentage utilize teaching ideas gained directly from reading research. Poor communication between researchers and teachers can be attributed to the underlying purposes for research and the methods through which it is disseminated. The undertaking of research projects is frequently motivated by a desire to satisfy requirements for graduation, promotion, or tenure, rather than a desire to contribute to the body of knowledge. In addition, researchers caring little for other views keep themselves and their students within the confines of their own disciplines, disregarding ideas from other schools of thought. Several things contribute to the problem--research writing is often unintelligible, students are encouraged to keep silent rather than express conflicting views, and teachers are seldom afforded contact with researchers through conferences. Improvement of reading research and instruction is dependent on respect for individual differences, the development of research centers for teachers and administrators, a focus on general as well as specific knowledge, and concern for community needs. (KS)

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Implications of Reading Research for Classroom Teachers and Administrators

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A Paper Presented at the

Sixth World Congress on Reading, Singapore

August 18, 1976

> It becomes a habit, maybe an addiction. You get a long-distance telephone call from some professional busybody at some foundation or university -- 'Sincerely hope you can fit it into your schedule--it will be a privilege to have you with us--return fare economy class and a modest honorarium...' Or maybe no honorarium at all.

The passage is from a new novel by Arthur Koestler, his first major work of fiction 22 years after The Age of Longing and 32 years after Darkness at Noon. In his newer work Koestler narrates a meeting of twelve great minds of the world. Their task: to focus their attention on Approaches to Survival. The conference begins with a cocktail hour on Sunday evening, and Koestler watches over these people through the rest of the week relentlessly. He calls them--and his novel--The Call Girls.

What does a major work of fiction--or at least a work of fiction written by a major writer--have to do with Implications of Reading Research for Classroom Teachers and Administrators?

Appreciation is extended to Charlene Andolina and Lynn Kent for their help with this work.

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Like other important writers, Koestler is a keen observer, and what he relates should not be dismissed lightly. He notes that "the characters in this tale are fictitious, but the authors, publications and experiments quoted by them are authentic." What he says about research and its dissemination has a direct bearing on our topic.

There is not time here to talk more of Koestler and his writings, some of which are available in 33 languages and all of which will be available in 20-volume edition. Let me just say that Koestler came to mind last month when I examined the results of a nationwide questionnaire study prepared for this presentation. He came to mind when I examined the findings of an in-depth look at teaching practices in two schools in the State of Pennsylvania. He came to mind as I reflected on more than a hundred documents and twenty years of teaching in schools and universities in the United States and Canada.

From a consideration of all these data, it is with regret that I report that, with relatively few exceptions, teachers and administrators find little use for research.

Findings from Teachers in Two Schools in Pennsylvania and Superintendents of Schools throughout the United States

Only 15 per cent of teachers in two schools near Pittsburgh identified research articles as providing them with the impetus to make changes in their classrooms. Similar findings came from questionnaires mailed to 1,000 superintendents of schools throughout the United States. The questionnaires were designed to identify changes in the reading and language arts programs in their schools. The respondents had the opportunity to indicate their degree of familiarity with these changes

and whether or not they had implemented them in their schools within the last 3, 5, or 10 years. By placing a check in one of five columns, for instance, each respondent could indicate familiarity with and/or implementation of miscue analysis, cloze procedure, flexible scheduling, non-graded classes, programs for learning disabled, for the gifted. They had the opportunity to respond to a total of 44 items.

The questionnaire included a lie factor which was composed of ten items such as ontogeneous reading instruction, burst-on-target reading, and BRA Study Skills. You will be pleased to know that, while some respondents indicated a familiarity with these non-existent items, few indicated that they had been implemented in their schools.

To each of the 44 items the 454 respondents indicated their sources of information. That is, how did they know about rebus readers, or mapping, or the maze technique? Through courses? periodicals? inservice? informal meetings? conference proceedings? ERIC? The preliminary analyses indicate that, as in the in-depth study of two schools, only a small percentage came about their ideas from research directly.

Most of the respondents indicated no familiarity with cloze procedures even though the concept was reported a quarter of a century ago. While it is used in much reading research, it seems to be coming into the schools (like other research-based ideas like sentence combining as well as reading in the content areas and writing in the content areas) through the implementation of commercial publications.

The complete data of the questionnaire study will be reported in a few months at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

Consideration of Findings

How can we explain the limited use of research by teachers and administrators in schools throughout the United States? Two related questions may provide the answers: why is research done? and how is research disseminated?

Why is research done?

Students tend to do research to satisfy requirements for advanced degrees; their doctoral dissertations (and, in some places, masters theses) are among the finest (and worst) research available. It does not follow, though, that satisfying research requirements for advanced degrees also satisfies interests and needs of schools. Indeed, relatively few students even share their findings with teachers and administrators, and those who do tend to do so in a form that is of little use. Having attained their degrees, most never do another piece of research for the rest of their lives, and a good portion of these one-shot researchers are among those whose dissertations have been honored by the International Reading Association.

While there are some professors who make steady and important contributions to the body of reading research every year, most professors seem to do research to satisfy requirements for promotion and tenure. But they also tend to do (or, more likely, direct) research as if wearing blinders. Whenever I think of these researchers I am reminded of a scene from my childhood of a horse that used to pull a milkwagon. I used to stand on the sidewalk and watch the horse pulling the wagon with nary a look to the left or the right. With even greater intensity, some researchers caring little for other views keep themselves and their students within the confines of their own disciplines, disregarding the contributions of other disciplines and the ideas from other professions which would enhance the use of research in the schools.

Let me provide some examples which show how research can be confined narrowly.

The University of Pittsburgh has a component on campus called the Learning Research and Development Center whose mission is to develop and share research in a useful way with practitioners. Recently it has become interested in reading research. With large funds from the U. S. Government, the directors of the Learning Research and Development Center invited researchers to visit with them -- fifty came for three days in April, fifty for three days in May, and fifty for three days in June, to talk about research in beginning reading. Those invited came from all parts of the United States and the eastern part of Canada (with one person passing through from New Zealand). With only a few exceptions, those who came reflected the discipline of cognitive psychology. While this discipline has made some important contributions to an understanding of the reading process, so have researchers and practitioners from other disciplines.

Not only was there little interest in obtaining views of those from other disciplines, there was no interest in the reading research conducted under the direction of Marion Jenkinson whose students at the University of Alberta have been producing doctoral dissertations for a decade that have been honored by the International Reading Association. Her efforts at producing important reading research through her students resulted in her being honored at the IV World Congress on Reading in Buenos Aires.

While there was interest in experimental studies (classical and time-sequence), and some interest in certain kinds of descriptive studies (correlational), there was virtually no interest in case studies, longitudinal studies, surveys, or any kinds of historical studies, even though all of these have made important contributions to beginning reading research.

While these meetings were going on in April, May, and June, this same organization was writing a proposal to obtain funds for a National Reading Center; and, in a similar manner, there was no interest in views beyond their own even though only two blocks away there is a member of the board of directors of the International Reading Association.

Just as there is a tendency to avoid remote areas and to confine ourselves to our own disciplines, there is a similar tendency to neglect research conducted in other languages. I have come across books in Spanish which are virtually unknown to the research community in the English-speaking world. One by J. E. Segers first appeared in 1939 in Belgium and has 389 references to the reading process; his book has been reprinted three times in Spanish. Other books in Spanish virtually unknown to reading researchers in English include those by Berta de Braslavsky, Wolfgang Zielke, Antonio Blay Fontcuberta and a recent work by Jorge Bicbini and Enrique Savransky. I have brought these books to the attention of the ERIC Network; however, no funds are available to translate them. I regret that I am ignorant of other books on reading which may be available in Japanese or any of the other great languages of the world.

In short, research is done for reasons in addition to those which we tend to acknowledge.

How is research disseminated?

The formal ways of disseminating research is through publications, courses at universities, and conferences.

Publications

While some researchers write clearly, much research writing is among the worst writing in the world. Here is an example of something that came across my desk recently. The report is entitled Decoding, Semantic Processing, and Reading Comprehension Skills. Let me share with you the final paragraph:

> In conclusion, our results suggest that decoding and semantic processing are separable processes, and that although less skilled comprehenders have difficulty decoding, this does not result in difficulties in accessing meaning. This finding may have important ramifications for the study of the reading process for it suggests that less skilled comprehenders can automatically pick up the meaning of printed words. The source of difficulty, then, may not be located in single word semantic processing, but in some other component of the reading process.
>
> -- Golinkoff and Rosinski, 1975, p. 16.

It is no wonder that teachers or administrators do not pick up things like that to read: it is close to gibberish or what is more politely referred to as Engfish.

It is hard for me to understand why students of reading research all over the continent have the impression that they must write up (or down) their research reports in the third person for the sake of objectivity. (Subjectivity, which has so many charms, must wonder why so many researchers--except Piaget and a few other giants--adore Objectivity.) I have never heard a satisfactory explanation of how phrases like "It was found that" and "The investigator administered the tests" instead of "I found" and "I tested" make for greater objectivity--even though it is easy to see how such phrases give the impression of greater objectivity.

Giants like Sir Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein described their experiments and observations in simple, uplifting language.

From Newton:

> I made a little hole in the midst of the Paper for that Light to pass through and fall on a black Cloth behind it; and then I saw the two streams plainly.
>
> - (from the Third Book of Opticks, p. 326.
>
> I took a black oblong stiff Paper terminated by Parallel Sides, and with a Perpendicular right Line drawn cross from one Side to the other, distinguished it into two equal Parts. One of these parts I painted with a red colour and the other with a blue. The Paper was very black...
>
> - (from the Second Book of Opticks, p. 202)

I measured...

- (from the Second Book of Opticks, p. 301)

From Einstein:

> Let us suppose our old friend the railway carriage to be traveling along the rails with a constant velocity...
>
> - (from Relativity: The Special and General Theory, p. 19)
>
> I am standing in front of a gas range. Standing alongside of each other on the range are two pans so much alike that one may be mistaken for the other. Both are half full of water. I notice that steam is being emitted continuously from the one pan, but not from the other. I am surprised at this, even if I have never seen either a gas range or a pan before. But if I now notice a luminous something of bluish colour under the first pan but not under the other, I cease to be astonished, even if I have never before seen a gas flame. For I can only say that this bluish something will cause the emission of the steam, or at least possibly it may do so. If, however, I notice the bluish something in neither case, and if I observe that the one continuously emits steam whilst the other does not, then I shall remain astonished and dissatisfied until I have discovered some circumstance to which I can attribute the different behaviour of the two pans.
>
> Analogously, I seek in vain for a real something in classical mechanics (or in the special theory of relativity) to which I can attribute the different behaviour of bodies considered with respect to the reference-systems K and K'. Newton saw this objection and attempted to invalidate it...
>
> - (from Relativity: The Special and General Theory, pp. 85-86)

If Einstein and Newton wrote in straight-forward language, one wonders why so many investigators of reading behavior now feel that they must combine the third person with the passive voice to come up with prose that is convoluted. It strikes me as very unlikely that Newton would describe his experience by saying, "The investigator was sitting under an apple tree when it appeared that an object that looked like an apple either fell or was dropped upon the investigator's head."

Author's Note: The paragraphs about Einstein and Newton appeared as a guest editorial in the Journal of Reading Behavior.

Courses

Just as students are encouraged to write in the third person passive voice, so are they encouraged to think. Far better for them to remain silent, passive, anonymous and even obsequious than to express views that are not in accord with those of their professors. To do so is risky--a B instead of an A or perhaps no Ph.D.

For students who have made great investments of time and money, the cost of intellectual honesty and emotional integrity is far too high. It is more convenient to please professors.

With students who have shared with me their concerns I have shared with them the great poet W. H. Auden's poem, "The Unknown Citizen."

The Unknown Citizen
(To JS/07/M/378
This Marble Monument
Is Erected by the State)

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he
was a saint,
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in
every way.
Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,
And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left
it cured.
Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare
He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan
And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;

When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war,
he went.
He was married and added five children to the population,
Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of
his generation,
And our teachers report that he never interfered with their
education.
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

"And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education." We must listen to our students so that we, as well as they, become educated.

Conferences

Notwithstanding what Koestler says, conferences are important. It is good to see old friends again, make new ones, learn what's going on elsewhere. To do this, though, we tend to go to the same conferences--teachers go to conferences for teachers, administrators to conferences for administrators, and researchers to conferences for researchers. Some of this is financial of course; we can only go to so many conferences.

Nevertheless, it is the rare researcher who listens to teachers and administrators at their conferences, and the rare teacher or administrator who comes to research conferences. Such interchange should be encouraged, for researchers would come to learn more about the actual problems of busy teachers and administrators who in turn would learn more about the needs of researchers. Without such interchange, we tend to talk to ourselves, enjoying our own ideas reflected, our efforts applauded, engaging in a process somewhat akin to converting the converted.

But no matter who goes to what conferences, they are enjoyable and, at larger ones, which are known as conventions, there is an air of excitement and anticipation such as a person has in visiting a traveling Chautauqua.

Educational Implications

Before noting educational implications, let me apologize for over-simplifying and generalizing aspects of a complex matter. If only there were world enough and time to consider this matter more fully.

Even with what we know, though, we can do much to make reading research more useful to school teachers and administrators.

For a beginning, we might talk and listen more to each other and come to better know each other's problems. We might talk and listen more to children.

We could avoid calling children subjects--a concept not far removed from objects.

There are times, we can remember, when we may learn as much from an N of one as from an N of one thousand.

If we believe in individual differences, then we might use analyses which go beyond mean averages that tend to cloud reality.

If we really have concern for other human beings, then we must remember that masses of statistics can make us lose sight of them, just as the computer can make us lose our feel for the data themselves.

In doing basic or applied research, we can communicate ideas clearly; we can keep in mind our audience: for teachers and administrators we can develop more publications focusing upon the expansion of the educational implications in research reports.

We can establish drop-in research centers for teachers and administrators around the country.

Let us strive to be generalists as well as specialists, recalling that an expert is one that knows more and more about less and less.

You may recall, incidentally, that Buckminster Fuller, inventor of the geodesic dome, could not get past his freshman year at Harvard. Whenever I think of Harvard, I think of Cambridge, and it strikes me as amazing that with all Harvard's brainpower, the Boston-Cambridge area has one of the highest crime rates in America.

We must take care not to cater to a reward system which pays little heed to the community.

Perhaps Buckminster Fuller is correct in thinking that

> We are in an age that assumes the narrowing trends of specialization to be logical, natural, and desirable. Consequently, society expects all earnestly responsible communication to be crisply brief. Advancing science has now discovered that all the known cases of biological extinction have been caused by overspecialization, whose concentration of only selected genes sacrifices general adaptability. Thus the specialist's brief for pinpointing brevity is dubious. In the meantime, humanity has been deprived of comprehensive understanding. Specialization has bred feelings of isolation, futility, and confusion in individuals. It has also resulted in the individual's leaving responsibility for thinking and social action to others. Specialization breeds biases that ultimately aggregate as international and ideological discord, which, in turn, leads to war.
>
> -- Buckminster Fuller, Synergetics, xxv

It seems that Buckminster Fuller has much in common with people like Agatha Christie and Minnesota Fats. They are all keen observers. They see relationships that we do not see easily. Minnesota Fats looks at a pool table and sees new designs. Agatha Christie turns commonplace events into mysteries. Buckminster Fuller, like Einstein and Newton--and Arthur Koestler--unravels some of our own mysteries.

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